

On the Necessity of Bad Reviews

by

Adam Fielded

The attitudes prevalent in the poetry world today have created an atmosphere in which bad reviews of poetry books are (for the most part) unacceptable. The phenomenon of the poetry review-as-puff-piece takes place in a wide variety of contexts—online journals and blogs, print journals, press releases, and anthologies. The poetry protocol of gathering positive quotes to use on book jackets fits squarely under this rubric. I would like to opine that this trend, which encourages clannishness, reinforces coterie affiliations, and establishes poetry as a lightweight art-form, is largely negative and needs to be changed. Even popular music contexts encourage more healthy debate, where aesthetics are concerned, than poetry does. Aesthetic debates in poetry tend to be “my group against your group,” a struggle for uncontested hegemony, rather than the productive arguments that initiated movements like British Romanticism and Modernism, and resulted in stunning new work. “Soft poetry culture” necessitates that interviewers ask easy questions, older poets are surrounded by fawning sycophants, while younger poets jockey for position based on their connections and alliances. For poetry to become a culturally heavyweight art-form again, poets (especially the ones being nurtured in MA and MFA programs) need to be taught to question their teachers, challenge poetry systems, and (perhaps most importantly) to write both good reviews and negative ones. The poetry world suffers from a dearth of angry young men and women, of rebels and revolutionaries. The first question that arises from these assertions is a crucial one—if “soft poetry culture” is predominant, how and why did it become this way? The answers are complex and myriad—nevertheless, a tentative investigation may be fruitful if it is agreed that these issues are, in fact, issues, and important ones.

Most poets in this day and age have some affiliation with academia. If you are reading a modern poet’s book, there is a very good chance that the poet has not only a university degree but an advanced degree (usually an MFA or MA) as well. The relationship between poetry and academia has become so entwined that it may no longer be worthwhile to investigate whether or not this basic association itself is healthy or unhealthy. What, exactly, are poets being taught in these programs? Programs vary widely, and it would be absurd to generalize; nonetheless, I have both an MFA and an MA, one from a conservative institution, one from a liberal institution. This puts me in a unique position to comment on this situation. I do so, enjoining the caveat that I welcome both commentary and dissent, and that there may or may not be representativeness to my experiences. I have found conservative and liberal poets to be roughly 70% similar; they tend to credit themselves with much more differential than is actually there. Both sides cling very closely to coteries and coterie affiliations; both tend to encourage their students to accept their pronouncements uncritically. In my experience, poetry teachers at this level tend to only use “hardness” (hard pedagogical techniques) to keep others soft. Soft poetry culture dictates a strict master/servant relationship in these contexts—masters can be as hard as they want, servants (students) must remain soft. In more exacting disciplines (the natural sciences, for example), this division is more necessary—answers can be proven, things need to be learnt. But in art, which has as its ontological foundation what might be called “total subjectivities” (no one can prove what works, what does not, and even master narratives often come down to people’s opinions), master/slave dynamics are not only unproductive but actively unhealthy. Liberal poets, I have found, are 30% more genuinely liberal than conservative poets, and 70% as pigheaded, domineering, and coercive. Investigation of these issues becomes like playing with Russian dolls; opening up one issue leads directly to the discovery of another one. What leads poetry teachers in these programs to disseminate soft poetry culture through hard tactics? If it has the effect of softening sensibilities, why do sensibilities need to be softened?

I wrote, in a preface to *Ocho #11*, that poetry is a tough gig, and it is. Material rewards are scarce, competition is fierce, and tremendous dedication is required to even get a foot in the door. Those who have the good fortune to become successful in poetry tend to be warped by the atmosphere of deprivation that surrounds poetry endeavors. The line between those who are successful and those who are not can be thin indeed. Poets are fiercely protective of their little domains (and they usually are very little indeed), and this fiercely protective instinct gets enacted by a process and an impulse not unlike what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “demarcative imperative.” Those who are above are forced by ambiguous circumstances to say they are above, and to enact this superiority. Students must be softened into receptivity—a student reacting to hardness with hardness would be an impermissible threat, in a radically unstable, ambiguous context. This is how soft poetry culture is perpetuated—through the hardness of teachers. And it is through teachers that students often obtain their first publication opportunities. Thus, young poets become “foot soldiers” for their teachers—they are soft meat, determined to carry the torches that have been passed down to them. Because so many poetry contexts are predicated on regionally or aesthetically dominant coteries, to break out of these rigid structures is a task indeed, and one younger poets are not encouraged to undertake. “Toe the line,” goes the master narrative that dictates so much of younger poets’ behavior, “and you will be rewarded; expressions of individualism will lead to irreversible exile status. It is softest (and most rewarding) to conform.”

Textual expressions of conformity often take the form of puff-piece reviews. In an unspoken fashion, this becomes a mode of “playing the game,” which necessitates perpetual softness. It also must be noted that “screaming at the other side” (who may or may not be listening) of the liberal/conservative, experimental/mainstream divide does not necessarily qualify as hardness. It reinforces a poet’s own coterie associations, and is often used as a tactic to draw attention to one’s self. Honest looks at those within one’s own domain are hard to come by, and this fact prohibits poetry from becoming as rigorous (formally and thematically) as it could be. Students beaten into softness are so terrified of losing their little places that criticism of what immediately surrounds them would be unthinkable. Combat (perverse as this sounds) needs to start at home; conflict and warrior skills should not merely be aimed at distant enemies. Conflict within coteries should be encouraged; individualism needs both to be espoused and practiced by teachers. Taking this a step further, the question remains as to what a more ideal (or “heavyweight”) poetry world would look like. Why would, not a dominant strain of bad reviews, but a balance of good and bad reviews, inject new life into an art-form that many people have given up for dead?

Young artists need to have teeth, bite, and guts. To the extent that young artists are being taught that teeth, bite, and guts (and I will resist the temptation to get academic with these words, as commonsense definitions apply) are negative, undesirable attributes, the poetry world looks (at least from a distance) like a realm of stilted pabulum. Non-poets tend to think of poetry as boring; it often is. Artists that work in other mediums actively employ the works of canonical poets, while eschewing works of contemporary poets, for a simple reason: because contemporary poets are not good enough (this applies to everything from R.B. Kitaj’s usage of Eliot to Lady Gaga’s fascination with Rilke). Older poets have had their shot; the decades to come may show to what extent they have or have not succeeded in their endeavors. But the real fate of modern poetry is in the hands of younger poets, who (whether they realize it or not) do have options. One healthy option to explore is the possibility that an approach grounded, not in softness or hardness alone, but in a balance of softness and hardness (as manifested both in poems and in reviews), would be conducive to the growth of healthy, diverse poetry contexts, which could transcend the usual coterie prejudices. As a final confession, I will say this: I have written my share of puff-pieces. But the time has ended in which I can do this in good conscience; and to the extent that I feel writing negative reviews could, in some sense, be productive, I will be willing to get the hatchet out.

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Century XX After *Four Quartets*

by

Adam Fieled

With the remnants of the twentieth century still surrounding us, it may pay dividends, as the twenty-first century takes off, to take stock of these remnants and begin to make judgments. Newly ended centuries tend to leave detritus; this can create a hostile environment for artists who wish to sow new seeds and blaze new trails. Few seem to remember that when Wordsworth and Coleridge put out *Lyrical Ballads* (though the release and dissemination of this pivotal text spanned the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century), it received hostile reviews and a good amount of indifference, as well. With hindsight, we realize that this was the text that almost single-handedly initiated British Romanticism. The early twentieth century was also inconclusive; William Butler Yeats was only beginning to receive the recognition that would lead to laurel, Walt Whitman's poems were yet to receive the blessings of posterity, while a host of lesser lights congregated around minor poets or reveled in the just-dimming glow of Decadence and Aestheticism. What do we see around us in 2010? It is a poetry world stumbling for direction, still largely lost in the theoretical wilderness of post-modernism, which espouses, among other things, the notion that distinctions between high and low art are both superfluous and illusory, that high art is the imaginary creation of hegemonic white males, and that artists can safely toss history in the dustbin and create out of momentary impulses, that have a better chance of capturing authentic effects than the backwards/forwards time-warp effect that Modernists like Eliot and Pound thought efficacious.

I would like to argue, firstly, that the demarcations between high and low art need to be reinstated. My reasons for this are manifold, but the simplest is this: I do not believe that much English language poetry composed after 1943, the year that Eliot's *Four Quartets* were released, deserves the title of high art. Before I explain why the twentieth century, post *Four Quartets*, was mostly a washout for English language poetry, let me explain what distinctions I believe subsist between high and low art. High art is defined by a sense of aesthetic balance; a host of factors must be present and accounted for; technical competence is a necessity, breadth of vision (so that any narrowness of focus is soon dissipated into fusions with larger wholes), narrative solidity (even when, as in *Four Quartets*, it is a loosely woven narrative, that makes frequent subtle shifts in different directions), and, most importantly, continued serious engagement with serious themes. If this harkens back to Matthew Arnold's emphasis on truth and seriousness, and if this seems regressive, remember that, in poetry, the impulses of post-modernism have all but flushed these constituent elements. Low art impulses often maintain a stance that technical competence is unnecessary, that breadth of vision is too ambitious, that narrative solidity is a remnant of the nineteenth century (and, to the extent that Yeats and Eliot, the only two twentieth century high art poets in the English language, had strong nineteenth century affiliations, this may be the case), and that "seriousness" is an outdated and outmoded concern. So that, the notions of high art and low art have been both displaced and misplaced, with disastrous results. We are surrounded by detritus that attempts too much with too little; that encompasses not worlds but narrow grooves; that shies away from responsible, serious engagements, or courts these engagements with such brow-beating incompetence that the matters were better left alone; and that uses sly evasions to explain its own horrendous deficits.

Back to T.S. Eliot; what is it that makes *Four Quartets* high art, and almost everything that followed in the twentieth century dross? *Four Quartets*, however sententiously, starts from a high ground; the artist is coming to grips with the limitations of living in space and time. Eliot flattens space and time out in the context of an investigation of four places, each with its own peculiar resonances, which birth separate and discrete impulses in the poet, resulting in slight shifts in perspective and emphasis. *Four Quartets* is useful, also, because it demonstrates the loosest narrative emphasis possible in a poem that attempts to achieve and maintain the durability and permanence traces of high art. Narrative is the backbone of serious poetry; *Four Quartets* has an "I" that dictates terms, but in such a way that "I" is not an obtrusive presence. If there is an imbalance in *Four Quartets*, it is or may be a sense of oscillating perspectives that leads to a less than unitary presentation, or a loose sense of coherence that sometimes meanders away from central points. However, there is a sense that this is redeemed by a spirit of inquiry that balances philosophical concerns with concrete details, fragments of colloquial speech with natural imagery, traces of humanity's past with visions of possible human futures. That *Four Quartets* spans all this ground does not, in and of itself, make it high art; but that Eliot's language is taut, sinewy, disciplined, and rich makes the whole of *Four Quartets* ring as a solid, major work of high literary art. If another such work exists that was released between 1943 and 2000, I haven't seen it.

The Objectivists, the Beats, the New York School (first and second generation), the Confessional poets— what do these poets lack, so that the appellation high art does not affix to their work, nor the appellation high artist affix to them? For many of these poets, it is the ragged lack of discipline in the language of their poems themselves. Trying to read Beat poetry is like trying to eat raw slabs of uncooked red meat. Thematically, the Beats might have been redeemed by an egalitarianism that harkened back to Whitman; formally, they were creators of tremendous Babels that are even now beginning to collapse. The Objectivists did have ambitions consonant with the approach of high artists— but their panoramic viewpoints were undermined by impoverished lines that displayed little heft, music, and which demonstrate, rather than the rawness of uncooked red meat, an overwhelming brittle dryness. The New York School poets evinced significantly more delicacy, thematically and formally, than the Objectivists and the Beats; however, the primary perpetrators of New York School poetry tended to get lost in certain extremes: either language so steeped in colloquialisms that it lost its sense of itself as art, or language so bent against narrative that it lost its sense altogether. Had the Confessional poets widened their scope, they might have gained a sense of consonance with poetry as a high art form—but the narrowness of their thematic scope precluded a sense of serious engagement with issues that transcended the personal. As such, they, along with the Objectivists, the Beats, and the New York School poets, fall squarely under the rubric that covers minor poetry and poets, when placed next to the scope and achievements of Eliot and Yeats. Other groups, like the San Francisco Renaissance poets and the Language poets, seem like a mélange and a mish-mash of these styles. Minor Modernists (Pound, Williams, Stevens, Stein) initiated many trends toward disjuncture and colloquialism; because the high art balance of Yeats and Eliot was (and remains) more rigorous and more difficult to achieve, it has inspired fewer immediate imitations.

High art balance, as such, depends on serious engagements with the history of poetry, and also with a sense of discernment. Though Eliot did dote upon some minor French poets, his knowledge of the history of major poetry artists, as expressed in his early essays, was complete and solid. It allowed him vantage points that set his sense of aesthetic equilibrium on a high level. Because he had the discerning impulse to separate wheat from chaff, he could accomplish the major feat of moving poetry forward in innovative ways while also conserving the best of poetry that had come before. Yeats' engagement with history was no less complete; though he lacked the theoretical bent that defined Eliot, it would have been unthinkable for him not to know the Romantics, the Neo-Classical poets, the Metaphysical poets, Elizabethans, back to Dante, Chaucer, and beyond. Yeats also had a comprehensive knowledge of Irish mythology, which added an ancillary resource to his repertoire. Put simply: these are men that did their homework, on any number of levels. Because they maintained a sense of discipline and responsibility about their traces, moving forward meant taking history into account at each juncture. The idea that history is a flush, that the canon of English language poetry was largely created by and for white males and so has a built-in obsolescence, is pitifully shallow and ultimately pernicious. If this canon is not yet a fully multicultural canon, it is nonetheless an indispensable resource; it is the only true measure we have of how far our own arrows can sail out into the universe. Century XX encouraged poets, after 1943, to eschew the essential challenge presented by Eliot and Yeats; how to move forward and conserve at once. As the twenty-first opens, it is this dual impulse which again presents itself as our brightest hope to rise to the challenges presented by a rich, if increasingly distant, past.

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